

Emerging Korean Artists: Aesthetic Sophistication and Issues of Globalization

Junghye Lee | Professor, Portland State University, USA

In such a short period contemporary Korean art has reached a high level in terms of techniques and media manipulation.¹⁾ Korean artists have joined the international community of contemporary art, where their statements about Korean aesthetics are appreciated in such a way that while looking at each piece it is possible to identify the characteristics of an emerging Korean international style. Yet, Korean artists working internationally have found only small audiences and few patrons. This is no longer because Western societies appear unable to understand Eastern aesthetics. Especially recently, with the Beijing Olympics, contemporary art from Asia has received much attention and critical praise, especially in the case of shocking and often political work from contemporary Chinese artists. This situation helps to promote the contemporary Korean art as a part of contemporary East Asian art. What more can be done to promote the status of contemporary Korean art abroad?

The development of contemporary art in Korea was encumbered for most of the 20th century, first by the Japanese occupation from 1910-1945, then the Korean War from 1950-1953, and finally the extended period of military government (1961-1989). The key turning point was 1988 when the works of foreign artists were installed at the Olympic Park for the Olympic Games in Seoul, and in 1989, when restrictions on foreign travel were lifted for Korean citizens. Because the freedom to travel was accompanied by economic prosperity, many Korean artists were finally able to go abroad for observation and education.

Since 1989 contemporary Korean art, though still 'young' by European and US standards, has been gaining prominence both in auction houses and galleries around the

world. The Gwangju Biennale began in 1995 and was held bi-annually in Gwangju, Korea. The Gwangju Biennale is an internationally recognized biennial in which important artists from Asia as well as the rest of the world, including North Korea participated. International artists submit works compete for places in this large exhibition, and it enables Korean artists and students to see highly regarded international without leaving the country.

The ban on purchasing property as investment by President Roh Muhyeon's government (2003-2008) also drove investors to buy art as investments. Koreans went to auction houses such as Christie's in Hong Kong, New York, London, Paris, and all over the world, to buy back the traditional art that was taken from Korea during the war and Japanese occupation and later sold to collectors, as well as to buy the works of other nations such as contemporary Chinese art as investments. Christie's location in Hong Kong has become the most important venue for Christie's Asian market. These phenomena drove the market price higher and started to draw the attention of Korean galleries. In addition the Korean galleries in Seoul started to create branch offices in Hong Kong, Paris, London, Manhattan and Los Angeles, and Korean art began to be internationally known, making it possible to purchase contemporary Korean work around the world.

Korean TV dramas and movies became popular in Asia after the institution of governmental policies to promote Korean culture abroad. This move created the Korea Wave, which prompted the entertainment industry and the government to further make Korean artists known to the world. Korean artists began to participate in major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennial, and the Gwangju Biennale at home as well. Major Korean international exhibitions have also been sent

1) I would like to thank the members of PoNJA-GenKon@topica.com to provide me the information about the contemporary Korean art exhibitions from all over the world.

abroad from Korea, such as the *Crossing 2003 Korea/Hawaii* in Honolulu, 2003, *Through the Looking Glass* at the Asia House in London, 2006, *Leaning Forward, Looking Back* at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, and *Your Bright Future: 12 Korean Artists* curated by Lynn Zelevansky which is still in the planning stage at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and will be shown from June 28 to September 20 of 2009 at LACMA as well as at The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.²⁾ Korean artists frequently participate in important group shows of contemporary Asian art such as the *Contemporary Art of Asia exhibit held in the Asia Society* in New York in 1996, and the upcoming exhibit to be held in the Guggenheim Museum of Art in 2010.

Many organizations such as the Korea Foundation sponsor exhibitions in major museums, and Korean universities promote faculty and student exchange art exhibitions. One example is the University of Ulsan. When I started to work at Portland State University in 1994, I planned an exchange exhibition of the faculty works of Portland State University and the University of Ulsan, which started in 1996 and became a bi-annual exhibition. Now the exhibition includes student works and has expanded to two rented gallery spaces, one for the student work and one for the faculty of both universities to be shown together. The artists easily became friends and through art, they have been able to communicate their ideas and participate in an exchange that moves beyond their linguistic and cultural barriers, which is the primary goal of much internationalist work today. When the exchange exhibition became a joint exhibition of the faculty and student work of both universities in 2004, it was of further significance to include student works as the young generation innately understands the value of communication, and of sharing their culture and experiences through their art works.

Because internationalism and the open exchange of global ideas are so important to contemporary artists, the originality in contemporary Korean art is so difficult to discuss. Right now, the shocking element traditional to earlier movements in the United States or Europe, such as the Dada movement of Marcel Duchamp or Salvador Dali, Francisco Bacon, or even the current work of Damian Hirst, is not an important factor in contemporary Korean work. Similarly, the energy of the post-war Gutai movement in Japan or the current socially

charged and expressive work of Chinese artists does not resemble contemporary Korean art. When there was social conflict in the 1980s, Korea had Minjung art which could be viewed as unique and different from Chinese or Japanese contemporary art,³⁾ but now the military government no longer rules the country and the relationship with North Korea has improved over the last eight years, along with the living standard of the common people, and the perspective of Minjung art has disappeared. Though shared internationalist elements are certainly present in contemporary Korean art, the emerging aesthetic is more conservative and understated than purely 'Western' work. Playfulness and humor is present in the vernacular, but spontaneity has not championed over the traditional refinement shaped by a history of Confucian values and intellectualism.

The current status of contemporary Korean art may have two points. One point focuses on issues surrounding Korean identity and what Korean art exactly is. The second feature lies in the current status of the country outside of the concepts of national identity and specifically in that Korea has already past its phase of experimental art.

Some Korean artists are enormously successful in the United States, with Nam June Paik who had original ideas and innovative use of technology and Nikki Lee whose photography work under the title "Projects" has her seamlessly assuming identities as a subject in photographs where her outward appearance ranges from trailer trash, to punk rocker, to lesbian to the elderly to explore the concept of identity. Nam June Paik, Nikki Lee and even Lee Bul have had major shows in large American museums, such as the Whitney Museum in New York, because of the connections each artist made from having worked outside of Korea for so long.

These artists' radical work is in contrast to the safe and

2) E-mail correspondence from Dr. Lynn Zelevansky on September 19, 2008.

3) For the discussion of Minjung art, see Youngna Kim, *Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, New Jersey and Seoul: Hollym publishers, 2005), 52-61, and Youngna Kim, *20th Century Korean Art* (London: Lawrence King Publishing Ltd., 2005), 260-264. and Frank Hoffmann, "Images of Dissent: Transformations in Korean Minjung art," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 44-49.

generic art that has been shown as contemporary Korean art in American exhibitions. Two major South Korean contemporary shows in the United States, *Leaning Forward Looking Back*, (2003) and *The Offering Table*, (2008) have had very lukewarm receptions. *The Offering Table* curated by Linda Inson Choy at Mills College Art Museum in Oakland, California was a showcase of contemporary feminist South Korean artists.⁴⁾ The artists presented good cases in the exhibition and the symposium entitled Places at the Table held at the University of California at Berkeley Art Museum on September 13, 2008. However, the feminist movement is progressing in South Korea quickly. The American conception of women's plight does not make strong sense in this context, and any expectations of shocking or conceptual art for this exhibition did not make sense in light of everything going smoothly.

Leaning Forward Looking Back curated by Seungwan Kang was an elegant and nostalgic show that was hindered by the act that the art the Korean Museum of Contemporary Art was providing for the show in San Francisco was turned out to be linked to the past rather than conceptually contemporary or shocking in any way engaging for its American audience.⁵⁾ The works show modern concepts and perfect mastering of the techniques which the collectors in the West could appreciate if calm modern Asian art was in vogue, but to the untrained eye there was little with which to connect.

North Korean art is selling outside of North Korea. Why is that? In my opinion this is due to the uniqueness of owning a piece from the most closed off country in the world as well as to the fact that there is but one single gallery that has North Korean art hung continuously. So unless a patron is ready to personally travel to North Korea, only one dealer can serve the need for communist art. The North Korean art is now appreciated because of its very rarity; North Koreans are the last to produce communist work, and their socialist art is powerful and totally different from the work of the

modern period, making it a good fit to suit the taste of post and post post-modern art collectors.

For Korea to enter the art scene as a major player the country needs to embrace Korean born artists the world over. This will mean letting go of what Korean curators have established as "Korean-ness." Korean artists should be trained to be original, but this does not mean that they must be trained to be 'Western'. It is important, however, that Korean artists escape from the educational attitude that artists faced during the colonial period of Japanese occupation. Korean students in the past followed the art of their masters to please them and to be accepted by the professors and peers. Korean artists need to be encouraged to be original, but within the boundary of what the society would accept as art. In the internationalist society that contemporary artists are all a part of, content is the most important element. Uniquely "Korean" elements can be particularly appreciated in a global context when they are encased in the contemporary language of innovative design, mixed media, and performative objects that are popular on a global scale.

An example of the problems faced by the contemporary museums in the U. S. was told to me by Emily Sano, former director of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Korean art exhibitions in San Francisco were not attended well, and it caused Sano much anxiety. The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco is a public museum paid for by tax payers. The city demanded a rise in the number of viewers and they counted visitors at the door. In order to boost attendance and membership, the Sano had a Geisha exhibition in which pornographic images were displayed in an effort to boost support for the museum. Emily Sano also brought an anime exhibition to the museum. She cancelled a large exhibition of Korean art, discouraged having large scale exhibitions of Korean art and left the museum. This year, the Asian Art museum of San Francisco held an exhibition of Ming Dynasty art. While the Chinese-Americans were not otherwise enthusiastic about the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Ming Dynasty exhibition drew a massive number of San Francisco Chinese. Therefore it is necessary to send exciting exhibitions that show the originality of Korean art, and which appeals to a broad number of people. Right now, Korean art has reached an international level of skill and internationally

4) L. Inson Choy et al., *The Offering Table: Women Activist Artists from Korea*, exhibition catalogue (Oakland: Mills College Art Museum, 2008).

5) Seungwan Kang and Jeff Kelley, *Leaning Forward, Looking Back: Eight Contemporary Artists from Korea*, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2003).

relevant content that can be appreciated by the people in the west and in the east. Since nostalgic exhibitions of contemporary Korean art have been so problematic, it is necessary to exhibit the works of the younger generation. This does not necessarily mean works that imitate the American art of the recent past. Pop art styles, performance, and simple kitsch are already things of the past in the United States.

Bahc Yiso is an example of an artist working in an international style which has some recognizable characteristics of the careful craftsmanship and clean design of contemporary Korean style. His "World's Top Ten Tallest Structures in 2010," shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale, has an international context that people from every continent can recognize. This familiarizing aspect is a pretense for the shared humor and playfulness in his projection of buildings to come. Yet, the piece is constructed in a serious light. Painstakingly carved, the group of model buildings is white and serene in the manner of Korean celadon ware, but this association is not strictly necessary to appreciate the buildings' quiet beauty.⁶⁾

Suh Do-ho frequently participates in international group exhibitions, and displays some similar qualities with work that is painstakingly crafted but presented in a light and effortless manner. "Reflection Gate," a copy of the gate to his childhood home, is an intricate and perfect copy made from a celadon blue nylon mesh which covers the floor to create a literal reflection, as if a clear pond surrounds the gate, and which lifts the gate off the ground, adding to its dramatic floating effect. The piece is personal because of its direct connection with the artist's past, and also makes a comment on the nature of globalized life, which puts the concept of home in an ever-changing perspective, as something that may float away as easily as the mesh which makes up the gate's design. Related to this piece are the portable, weightless houses which resemble the artist's personal history less than they do a current interest among designers and artists in utilitarian and impersonal living spaces.

At the Venice Biennale in 2002 Suh Do-ho exhibited "Some/One," a dress made of original iron military dog tags, which relate to the current condition of the two Koreas divided and at war. This striking image takes up the whole of the space it is exhibited in, spreading out onto the floor and

forcing viewers to walk over and contemplate the many names which together form the image of a single empty dress. The work emphasizes his ideas of many people fitting together to form a single whole body, with each person absolutely necessary to the stability of the whole. It also shares the elements of clean, meticulous design which is tactile as well as even and serene, and it has a recognizable history which is Korean, but which also transcends Koreans' experiences.

Cho Duck-hyon's work involves strikingly realistic portraits which are copied from old black and white photographs. Some of the portraits are monumental in size, and all are meticulous photo-realistic graphite and charcoal drawings on canvas. Many of the pictures are accompanied by long pieces of white fabric stretching out from the portrait into the viewer's space. The extension of the portrait with real cloth in front of the work is unusual, and its clean tactile lines and the overall muted tones of the works fit them into an internationalist Korean style. The concentration is on history, which literally comes alive in these portraits, but it is something of a shared history, that of early photographic portraiture, which carries with it a kind of global nostalgia.

Choi Jeong-hwa's kitsch art such as "Super Flower" 1995 has a pop art element, in which a tulip is presented realistically but on a large scale and in plastic, making it obvious to everyone that it is fake, and produced from inorganic materials. However, unlike the pop art of the past, in which consumer objects were made larger than life and embellished by obvious handicraft, such as Claes Oldenburg's works in paper mache, Choi Jeong-hwa's work is perfectly crafted, with clean lines in surprising large shapes. The work combines nature with the mechanisms of a contemporary world, and on such a large scale it gives pause when approached in an open or outdoor space. "Plastic Paradise" (1997) shows wooden baskets modeled in green plastic and stacked in the way of the 9-storied pagoda which is a traditional form of Korean religious pagoda, representing the heavenly world.⁷⁾ The clean construction of these

6) For the illustrations of the works of the artists participated in Gwangju Biennale, see http://www.gb.or.kr/2006gbf/past/past_gb_artist_list.asp?b_seq=3.

7) Jiyeon Lee and Nanjie Yun, *Through the Looking Glass: Korean Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (London: Asia House, 2006). Also see the website <http://www.throughthelookingglass->

pagodas is at once particular and transcendental.

Another example that resembles pop art in some ways is Jung Yeondoo's *Wonderland* series, although as in Choi Jeong-hwa's structures the construction of Jung Yeondoo's environments is so tightly controlled, with clean lines and a refined architecture, that the absurd images are infused with a sense of realism. For the series, Jung Yeondoo reconstructed children's drawings in a diptych which shows the drawing and the photograph of the "real" scene side by side.⁸⁾ The bright colors of the children's crayons are copied, sometimes exactly, in the images which seem to defy gravity and logic in the way children's drawings do. The images also contain an iconography of symbols children understand, many in the form of Western fairy tales and movies, thus the images reveal the globalized world many children share.

Contemporary viewers often prefer work that can be appreciated immediately, with bright colors and humor such as Hwang Kyu-tae's work. In "Cloud Collector" (1999) and "Pigmented Yi Young-ae" (2004) bits and pieces of surrealism, pop art, and popular culture are combined in photographs.⁹⁾ "Pigmented Yi Young-ae" in particular comments on the trend for Asian celebrities and young people to copy the look of idealized anime characters with Western features. The young actress in the photograph glows with technicolor hair and impossibly idealized, liquid black eyes, an effect which seems to emphasize her desire to communicate with the viewer while she herself remains foreign and distinct.

The recognition of pop culture's influence on globalized life is present in the internationally known artist Lee Bul's work as well. Lee Bul's cybernetic sculptures present a broken, incomplete version of female machines, often with Western proportions, which play on Western perceptions of an exoticized Asian woman as well as on Eastern perceptions of how feminist art should look. The cybernetic figures often resemble pieces from movie sets, but their purposeful finish, always separated from missing limbs and heads, relates

abstractly to the clean designs and tactile, yet visually refined sculpture of other Korean internationalist artists. Lee Bul is also well-known for her work with karaoke, involving a series of films as well as the karaoke "pods" which toured American galleries, entitled "Live Forever: Act Two." In the exhibit, large karaoke screens display words and images on the walls of the dark exhibition room, and visitors can sing inside of the pods, equipped with personal screens and headphones, where no one else can hear them sing. The pods allow people to communicate directly with the installation, but they also contradict the nature of karaoke, which is shared in a group rather than performed alone in a pod, the way video games are often played in cubicles in internet or gaming cafes throughout Asia.¹⁰⁾

Young-hae Chang's digital art, created in collaboration with the American artist Marc Voge under the name Heavy Industries, and based in Seoul, also plays with the concept of loneliness and its connection to technology and global communication.¹¹⁾ Heavy Industries produces digital art with Macromedia Flash by combining rapid frames of text in color blocks of black, white, and red, accompanied by music which is usually jazz. The artists work in many languages, and ask native speakers to collaborate on translations, often coming up with versions of the text which is not the same in each language, and which carries with it ideas specific to the culture of each language being used. The idea that the Internet can be used as the main presentation format, and the use of different languages and linguistic contexts in each piece works to bring a global culture together in one medium, the worldwide web, while acknowledging that translation is never completely accurate or relevant. The artists use graphic design to communicate openly with a vast audience, yet the work is subversive in its relationship to the art world, because its nature makes it impossible to sell as an object. This frees the artists to be creative without any restrictions, and allows them to communicate directly with a more populous audience than a typical gallery crowd.

This kind of subversive, objectless art is appreciated internationally, but as it is difficult to sell it is also difficult to promote outside of relatively small communities. At Portland State University, the well-known artist and professor Harrell Fletcher has recently begun a new program for MFA students, which focuses on 'social practice' instead of studio

exhibition.com.

8) Lee and Yun, *Through the Looking Glass*, 12-13.

9) For an illustration, see Youngna Kim, *Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea*, 67.

10) Frank Hoffmann, "Lee Bul: Cyborgs and Karaoke," *Art in America*, May 2002: 124-127.

11) For the website, see <http://www.yhchang.com>.

art.¹²⁾ The students' work includes people in the community as more important figures than any objects which may be the result of their primarily collaborative projects. Young-hae Chang was invited to give a lecture for these students and the community, and to talk about alternative mediums and collaborative, publicly engaging art. In America, art that involves public participation is enormously popular, as it is in Korea and on an international scale.

Ik-joong Kang's success in the West also relies on his participatory work. In many of his panel projects, participants were invited to draw on tiles, which Ik-joong Kang then assembled to cover the walls in the gallery or in nature.¹³⁾ In this way, the artist becomes a curator of people's work rather than a creator, which is exactly the kind of contemporary art that the students at Portland State University are studying. Involving the public in this simple way allows communication with the viewer and an interaction with the shared world. It also presents a kind of democratic idealism, in which everyone has a voice and everyone has a unique piece of the whole.

In a telephone interview on October 10, 2008, a prominent New York art dealer who asked not to be named said that she is struggling to sell Korean art, and especially contemporary art. She said that the role of a dealer is very important, because it is the dealer who must promote Korean artists abroad. According to this dealer, Americans only buy well-known artists, so for a Korean artist to sell work, it must be shown over and over again until the name of the artist is well-known. American buyers in particular prefer to patron artists whose work is philosophical, or who use philosophical ideas to explain their work. The dealer also said that she needs more patrons of Korean art are needed. Chinese works are bought by overseas Chinese as well as by companies that do business with China. 70% of Japanese works are bought by Americans, who seem to have an innate interest in Japanese design and popular culture. This phenomena is true even now is the economy is sluggish, and Japanese works have strong sales overall. As the most well known Korean artist working abroad, Nam June Paik's works are sold, but since video art is not a collector's item they are not sold at high prices, and video works in general do not sell well. The New York dealer said that contemporary ceramics in the traditional style sell better than ceramics which are

more sculpturally innovative than they are classical. The work of Korean artists Tchang-yeul Kim and Ungno Lee, who worked in France, are selling. Both artists successfully combine their Korean identity with Western materials and style. Tchang-yeul Kim's oil paintings are completed with the expressive brushstrokes of traditional Korean painting and contain elements of Eastern philosophy such as the emphasis on drops of water, which express the emptiness in Buddhism and the nothingness in Daoism. Lee U-fan's works also sell well. With his philosophy of expressing simple brushstrokes, he led a movement of non-representational art in Japan. His emphasis was also on the natural materials that he utilized for his paintings, by crushing rocks to make his own pigments instead of using commercial materials. The elemental nature of this process is evident in the completed paintings.

The difficulty of private Korean galleries operated by American dealers according to Robert Turley is as follows: Koreans are too competitive among the galleries.¹⁴⁾ They are not cooperative with Americans. Korean gallery owners ignore American dealers. Korean gallery owners never visit the galleries of American dealers and they do not visit each other. This phenomena is different from Japanese art galleries in New York, most of which are owned by American dealers. American dealers do not have enough funding to deal with Korean paintings which command high prices. Koreans apparently have not made friends with Americans, and perhaps in part because of cultural differences and simple unfamiliarity there are only a few American dealers who carry Korean work. The closed nature of Korean society makes it more difficult for Korean artists to market themselves in the way Western artists usually must do, and which Japanese artists have excelled at. In our conversation Robert Turley recounted how the Korean artists whose work he was trying to sell refused to trust his process. They declined to provide him with an artist's statement, biography, or resume, which for most patrons are crucial

12) <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com> is an example.

13) Ik-joong Kang, *Ik-joong Kang* (Seoul: Hyunsun Bang, 2007), 224 for a photograph. For also see <http://www.mgoon.com/view.htm?id=1451413> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAApmQtVKXw> in Korean.

14) Phone conversation on September 15, 2008. For his gallery, see www.koreanartandantiques.com.

elements in finding appreciation in the art they are considering. When Turley found a patron to buy one of the pieces, he tried to contact the Korean artist, asking for a bank account number in Korea where he could deposit the money from the sale, and the Korean artist simply did not respond and thus the works could not be sold. In this case there was a language and cultural barrier which prevented the artist from trusting a dealer abroad, and from providing the adequate tools for an international audience to appreciate the work. Turley's complaint was that Korean artists are not globalized. Not only does there need to be better communication, but Korean artists also need a better network of allies who can help navigate a global market. This means that single artists cannot work alone with a single dealer, but must find a community that will pave the way for better understanding internationally. None of Japanese art dealers in New York are Japanese, yet there are very few non-Korean dealers in New York. In spite of the fact that they created websites that can be viewed abroad, Koreans still do not recognize non-Korean dealers. Korean artists need to speak English, prepare an English biography and artist statement, and need to be able to explain in eloquent terms their works, concepts, techniques and materials. This will help recognition in America but also internationally, as English is often utilized as a common language in the rest of the world. Korean artists need to be more flexible about selling their works to Americans and cooperate with non-Korean dealers.

Korean artists have been very successful in Korea. As the dollar has gone down in value, the price of Korean artists' work has become very high. Therefore many excellent works are not sold, even if they are appreciated. Americans do not buy the works when they do not know the artists. They first see the works, and they do research on the artist and visit the websites and know about the concept. Therefore when the works of a certain Korean artists are shown in any city of

the United States, usually their works are not sold unless they decide not to ship the work back to Korea and simply lower the price. However, artists have contracts with the galleries in Korea and feel they have to keep the prices the same as in Korea, which prevents the artists from selling the works in the U.S. If Korean artists want to be known in the U.S., they need to meet the clients, speak, and explain the works in English during the exhibits and then come back and re-exhibit their works.

Lee Bul became known when she did the exhibition "Majestic Splendor" at the Guggenheim, in which the museum had to throw away the fish she exhibited because of the smell.¹⁵⁾ However, before the Guggenheim exhibition, she exhibited in many small museum and galleries. She did not suddenly become known. Ik-joong Kang submitted work to the 2001 Venice Biennale. He has a dealer in New York, with the Kang collection, who works hard to promote his works. Korean artists need to be well-prepared to create a bio and artist statement and should speak conversational English or prepare someone to translate the artist statement and help initiate conversations with international patrons, whether they are Korean-American, American or simply international dealers. Korean artists can also announce their work and upcoming exhibitions on websites such as www.e-artnow.org.

In dealing with an international scene, which contemporary artists in a globalized world can no longer remain obscure from, it is of utmost importance to have no fear of self-promotion. But beyond publicizing individual work, exhibitions which travel must have some level of participation that audiences can become excited about. While nostalgia and personal history are always appreciated, because of the stories involved, contemporary art must also be visually and physically engaging, prompting viewers to think with their whole bodies about what the piece is doing in its space and time.

15) Youngna Kim, *Modern and Contemporary Korean Art*, 76.